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ABSTRACT

English language teaching has become part of the process whereby one part of the world has become politically, economically, and culturally dominated by another, and the English language teacher has become an agent in the maintenance of international patterns of dominance and subordination. The core of this process is the central place English has taken as the language of international capitalism. The retention of English and English-medium education is a distinctive part of elite identity in many countries. The publishing industry and British government are intimately involved in this pattern. The content of most English textbooks is geared to the elite minority and has little to offer the majority of potential learners. English perpetuates unequal relationships both within English-speaking countries and internationally, and this role should be challenged, as it has begun to be by the growth of new varieties of English in countries around the world. (MSE)

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English as Imperialism?

There is a curious mismatch in the English language teaching profession in the U.K. On the one hand there is the English language teacher, often her/himself of a 'leftish' persuasion (often certainly someone with a 'liberal' conscience at the very least), often a refugee from the mainstream British school system, often having come into E.L.T. because she/he was unable to accept the compromises demanded by the daily grind of the state school classroom. On the other hand is his/her client, who may be an Iraqi pilot being trained for participation in the Gulf War or, perhaps more prosaically, a European, Japanese or South American business person learning English for the sole reason of pursuing profit wherever it may be found internationally, almost certainly with no reference to the same moral standards held by their teacher.

This mismatch between the apparent aspirations of E.L.T. practitioners and the reality of their classrooms is repeated at a more subtle level in the cosy, rather self-satisfied assumption prevalent at successive national and international conferences that E.L.T. is somehow a 'good' thing, a positive force by its very nature in the search for international peace and understanding. The ability to believe this is so and yet never seriously question the kind of morality of the kind of contract already referred to, particularly the kind of contract designed in effect to train people to become better, more efficient killing machines, is nothing if not disturbing.

An alternative explanation for this state of affairs would, therefore, seem necessary. The alternative explanation that presents itself is, however, rather disturbing. It is crudely that E.L.T. has become part of the process whereby one part of the world has become politically, economically and culturally dominated by another. The English language teacher has, wittingly or unwittingly, become an agent in the maintenance of international patterns of domination and subordination. The core of this process is the central place the English language has taken as <u>the</u> language of international capitalism.

Bowen[1] estimated in 1975 that there are some 600m speakers of English in the world today. 300m of these are reckoned to be native speakers of one or other variety of English, while the remaining 300m are users of English as a second or foreign language. The very existence of such a widespread speech-community is in many ways a product of the colonial period where

(1) Bowen

E.L.T. was indisputably a central part of the educational process aimed at creating what Macauley's famous (or infamous?) Minute of Education of 1834 described in the Indian context as:

"a class ... of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." (1)

It was to be the duty of this English-speaking intermediary class to administer the colonial system for the British. Ironically, because they had been deliberately educated into British values they would actually regard it as being in their own best interests to undertake this role.

The existence of many English-speakers internationally are part of the historical process outlined above. It would, therefore, seem necessary to pay some attention to the goals of imperialism, and the main reason for the introduction of English-medium (or in other contexts French-medium) schooling systems. Carnoy has described this process in the following way:

"far from acting as a liberator Western education came to most countries as part of imperialist domination. It was consistent with the goals of imperialism: the economic and political control of the people in one country by the dominant class in another."(2)

The practical effect of this process of domination was the use of English-medium education to destroy indifenous norms and values and replace them with those of the colonisers. This process was repeated on the international level in the same way as it was being played out in the destruction of the 'deviant' norms of for example Gaelic speakers at home.

Neither did this process die with the ending of the colonial period historically. English has remained powerful in many ex-British colonies, resisting for example even the demands of the large majority of Hindi speakers in India to downgrade its status as a recognised official language. Ironically one of the reasons that English is retained in many contexts is as an instrument of national unity in otherwise extremely diverse speech-communities: an irony because the glue holding together nations which were often artifically created by colonialism is the ex-colonial language itself.

Further, the link between the English language and the social elite remains in many ex-British colonies even today.

(1) Carnoy, M.

(2) op.cit.

Fanon [1] has for example argued that the usual pattern in Africa has been for the local elite to retain the culture, and as an integral part of this the language, of the metropolitan country and the links implied by this even in the post-independence period. The retention of English and English-medium education is a distinctive part of elite identity in many countries today.

It is this continuing link between what can (borrowing from dependency theory) be described as the centre and the periphery-elite which provides many English teachers, both in the U.K. and overseas, with their livelihood. Expatriate teachers are often needed to service the English-medium schooling system and many students, particularly at Higher Education level look to the U.K. and the U.S. for their own education, creating an increasing need for, for example, English language support units in British and North American Higher Education institutions. The spin-off from this process to privately-run schools and organisations is also far from inconsiderable.

E.L.T. publishers are, too, an integral part of the pattern. By ensuring that many English language teaching text-books are not published locally, or when published locally are published by local subsidiaries of British and American publishing houses, they help to consolidate a system whereby the flow of knowledge continues to be dominated by the values of the centre. Thus already heavily-entrenched patterns of international inequality are further strengthened, with economic, political and cultural power located firmly in the West.

Neither is the international economic importance of this link hidden. Sir John de Burgh, former Director of the British Council, has openly argued for the continuation of British government funding for overseas students on the grounds that the recipients of such aid will take up key positions in the elites of their own societies and as a result of their educational experience will naturally look towards Britain as an economic cultural and political partner. English language teachers are a key factor in this process, helping to lock the ex-colonial nations into the existing international economic order. In addition, the final irony would seem to be that the very 'industry', E.L.T. that undertakes this role is also itself an increasingly successful service industry in strictly capitalist terms, providing income from many countries unable to provide an acceptable standard of living for many of their own population.

(1) Fanon, F.

This link between the social elite and the English language is not restricted to the ex-colonial nations, as even the briefest consideration of the social-class composition of most language schools in the U.K., particularly during the summer period, readily shows. The social elites of European, South American and Far Eastern nations all perceive the need for a degree of fluency in English, although they may have little else in common. There is even some evidence to suggest that access to the social elite in the Soviet Union is often achieved through fluency in foreign languages, notably English. Even the U.S.S.R. is not powerful enough to escape the linguistic demands of the international economic order.

As suggested above, however, this link is not the product of pure fashion. There are powerful instrumental reasons why these very elite groups should need access to English. Without access to English there can be no easy access to science and technology or to international trade. It provides what Nehru once described as "a window on the world" or, more realistically, what Singapore's Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, has described as "direct access to the West."(1) English, as the principal language of the First and Second Industrial Revolutions, has become the language of capitalism and such is its hold that governments world-wide (even governments patently attempting to break away from international economic constraints: after all not even China has escaped being bitten by the bug of English) have little choice but to invest huge sums in the provision of English language teaching.

Even though learning English has patently very little to offer the majority of learners in many societies, however (as reference to the many descriptions of learners in schools without money to provide even the most basic equipment and with very little likelihood of ever being called upon to practise the English they are learning will surely show), it is unacceptable too visibly to admit that fluency in English is the preserve of the social elite. In many countries, therefore, a degree of exposure to English is part of the educational experience of the majority, although probably only ever of direct use to a minority.

Even the briefest examination of the view of the world perpetuated by the majority of E.L.T. text-books will, however, show that the content of E.L.T. remains geared to that minority. A recent interview with Ingrid Freebain as much as admits this where she admits that the characters of the "Strategies" series: "lead fairly normal albeit middle-class lives."(2)

(1)E.F.L. Gazette, Sept. 1984

(2) E.F.L. Gazette, March 1986 my emphasis

I do not single out "Strategies" for particular criticism. In the areas of anti-racism and anti-sexism Abbs and Freebairn's books are far better than many, perhaps the majority of, others. I simply ask what relevance the world of such text-books can have to the majority of learners of English in classrooms all over the world. Indeed, with many learners, notably those from the Islamic world, the values perpetuated are often in direct conflict with the values of their own societies, as Publishing Companies are now discovering.

In this way then the gearing of the schooling systems of the world to the needs of the minority who will succeed rather than any convincing perception of the needs of the majority is yet again apparent, as in so many other aspects of these same systems. If, as part of this process, the market for English-medium entertainment (the music heard everywhere, the t.v. programmes transmitted across the world and the films found in every cinema) is widened, then so much the better.

As Strevens has pointed out, though (with reference to the way in which English has become dominant while for example Portuguese did not):
"exploration, trade and conquest are not sufficient by themselves to ensure that a language becomes accepted for use by others as well as by those for whom it is the mother tongue."(1)
The willingness with which such a large number of governments are prepared to pay the immense costs ensuring such a large degree of E.L.T. provision as exists in the schooling systems of the world must surely point to something far more crucial. My argument is that it is an indication of the centrality of the English language in the maintenance of existing power relationships, as the language of capitalism. The central role of English was born with the capitalist economic system and it has continued to expand with that same system.

Further, to paraphrase Halliday, English:
"actively symbolises the social system, thus creating as well as being created by it."(2)
The judgement that:
"Patterns of language use are not only products of... economic and social stratification... but also helps to reproduce them."(3)

(1) Strevens, P.
(2) Halliday, F.
(3) Linguistic Minorities Project.

would seem as applicable to the role of English internationally as it is to the role of the English language in the U.K.

English has even been deliberately used, as noted above, in the suppression of other languages and dialects, supposedly in the interests of political 'unity' and 'stability'. The situation whereby the relative status of English and for example Urdu or Punjabi in the U.K. is:
"based, not on any inherent characteristics of the (minority) language, but rather on the status of the people who use it, and on past and present power relationships between Britain and the other countries where the language is used"(1) would seem to be echoed on a far wider scale. Both history and economic relationships have their place in the process.

To conclude then is the inescapable implication of this argument that the English language must by its very nature continue to perpetuate unequal relationships both within the English-speaking nations and internationally?

The healthy growth of the new Englishes may be an indication that the picture is not quite so black. English may after all be able to adapt to new situations and serve new masters or mistresses, although Quirk's rather pessimistic (my view, not his) judgement that:
"the more widely are disseminated the varieties achieved by the masses in E.S.L. countries, the more we shall have to introduce a second stream of English teaching to whom an international form of English is essential"(2) is perhaps a salutory reminder of the power of the international economic system to keep the English language in its thrall. Undoubtedly that "second stream" would become the preserve of the social elite.

The need to consider the ways in which English can possibly respond to the very different ideologies of for example China which has been pointed out by Brumfit (3) is perhaps another hopeful sign. It may, after all, be possible for English to be dominated by a counter-ideology. It is the position of the individual E.L.T. teacher, however, which provides the best hope for the future. The teacher has a straight choice. Does she/he silently accept the way in which the language has been and is being used to perpetuate the inequalities described at length above or does she/he actively question the ideological values being perpetuated in his/her classroom and in the materials she/he uses? Happily E.L.T. is not a

(1) Linguistic Minorities Project.

(2) E.F.L. Gazette, Sept. 1984

(3) Brumfit, C.J.

monolithic entity and the individual teacher is, in many, if not all, situations, free to make this choice.

Unless this process of questioning and challenging is actively encouraged the language we teach will continue to be used to perpetuate the kinds of international inequality many of us fundamentally disagree with.

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